Screen Education, 2007 by Marguerite O'Hara

Summary:

The article discusses the film "Witness," directed by Peter Weir, starring Harrison Ford and Danny Glover and how it can be used in the classroom to teach ideas about identity and community. The film revolves around a young Amish boy who witnesses the murder of a detective by corrupt officers. A study guide is presented providing teachers with questions they can ask students before and after viewing the film.

Excerpt from Article:

TEACHING MEDIA   
  
AT FIRST SIGHT:   
IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN   
  
WITNESS   
A STUDY GUIDE   
Curriculum BoxThe film is suitable for students of English, Cultural Studies. Film and Media Studies. Values Education and Religion and Society at middle and upper secondary levels. Middle school students will find much to explore and enjoy in Witness, and while this guide has been written specifically for students of senior English, several of the earlier activities could be completed by younger students. Witness is for study in one of the four Context studies in the revised VCE English course in Units 3 and 4 in Victoria. Context 4 headed Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging includes three other texts: Bombshells, a play by Joanna Murray-Smith; Sometimes Gladness, poems by Bruce Dawe; and The Catcher in the Rye, a novel by J.D. Salinger. a 1985 film by Australian director Peter Weir, is about communities and belonging, about continuity and disruption. These themes are explored within the dramatic story of the murder of a detective by corrupt fellow officers. This violent act was witnessed by a young boy from the Amish community. John Book ([Harrison Ford](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/213221/Harrison-Ford)), the detective heading the investigation, is sheltered within the Amish community, people who live a simple, non-violent life that is far from the world of a Philadelphia detective. While there is 'romance' and 'crime', Witness does not easily fit into either of these film genres. The crime story provides Weir with a hook on which to hang the story of the differences between two ways of life with very different values and approaches to resolving conflict. The film is framed by a family funeral at the beginning, and, at the end, the possibility of a new life beginning in an Amish farming community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the [United States](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States). The plot of Witness can be stated quite simply but this does not mean that the film is simple, Samuel (Lukas Haas), a young Amish boy, witnesses a murder in a train station toilet in Philadelphia. He is passing through the city with his widowed mother.   
  
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Introduction   
  
Rachel {Kelly McGiliis), on their way to Baltimore to visit her sister. From a series of photographs, Samuel identifies the killer as an undercover drug policeman. Lieutenant James McFee (Danny Glover). The investigating police officer, John Book, believing the boy to be in danger, hides him and his mother at his sister's house. Book confides his suspicions to his boss. Chief Paul Schaeffer (Josef Sommer). and shortly after is shot in the stomach by McFee. the corrupt cop responsible for the killing at the train station. The injured Book takes Samuel and his mother back to their fanm in their Amish community. Here the community cares for him and he lives with the Amish people. Book learns that his partner. Sergeant Carter (Brent Jennings), has been killed and that he (Book) is also in danger. Finally, the farm is invaded by the corrupt police, including Schaeffer. There is a Shootout and Schaeffer gives himself up. Book leaves and returns to the city. Ttiis summary of the film's plot does not deal with the central scenes of Book living within the Amish community. These scenes explore the most important themes of the film: identity and community.   
  
Structure of this guide   
This guide suggests ways to develop an understanding of Witness as a film within the context of Identity and Belonging. The emphases in the guide are very much on   
  
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eing separated from our familiar comforts can be quite confronting. This idea is increasingly being shown in a variety of ways in so-caiied 'reality' programs on television. These inciude Brat Camp. Big Brother. Sun/ivor, Wife Swap, Family Footsteps and a number of programs   
  
where people spend time trying to live In a reconstructed past, such as The 1940s House and The Edwardian Country people cope when many of their usual social supports and physical comforts are removed. However, people are only in these situations for limited periods of time before they return to their own worlds. There is a strong element of artifice and manufactured deprivation in some of these programs, as well as financial incentives that are often used to persuade people to live differently for a period of time. Watching such programs can satisfy our curiosity and even our fantasies about a different life without ever leaving our lounge room. However, they are far from the reality of actually being part of a different community. In an article for The Monthly, Drusilla Modjeska looks at the example of English writer and journaiist Tobias Jones.' In his 2007 book Utopian Dreams. Jones writes about his experiences as a participant-observer living in a number of communities. In response to the question "why would anyone turn their back on a comfortabie life and take their wife and smail daughter aiong for a tough year living in communities?', Jones explains that he had a permanent sense of dissatisfaction that shadowed even the successes of his iife. He was rebelling against the hypermodern experience of living as 'a permanent passenger' with too many choices.^ Jones writes: Nothing even alms for permanency or perfection . we're constantly buying because we're cool chameleons. We're ceaselessly changing: dressing up to assume new roles . The promise never comes to fruition. We can't even remember what the promise Modjeska notes that Jones' book opens with a cry: 'I simply can't continue living like this.' In Modjeska's words: He poses the question of what would happen if he were to opt out of the world we take as real in favour of the mirror world of community, where people work for the common good rather than for private gain, living in harmony with each other, or if not a/ways in harmony, at least with each other/ The community practised a high degree of self-sufficiency and everyone was vital to its survivai. Everyone had a role, a use. a purpose, and in fulfilling that role plays their part in something greater than themselves .no one is surfeit to requirements, no one outside the intricate machinery of the community.^ Jones says that "something happened through the alchemy of interdependence which allowed the individual unexpected freedom .'\*\* LEFT: HARRISON FORD AS JOHN BOOK \* House. Some of these programs offer insights into how   
  
THE CRIME STORY PROVIDES WEIR WITH A HOOK ON WHICH TO HANG THE STORY OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TWO WAYS OF LIFE WITH VERY DIEEERENT VALUES AND APPROACHES TO RESOLVING CONFLICT   
encouraging students to 'read' the film with as much care as they might read and study a written text and to apply this 'reading' to an understanding ot the themes explored in the fiim. Owning a copy of the film on DVD and watching it several times, both with others and alone, is as important as owning a written text which is reread and annotated. Students should be encouraged to watch the film at least twice, with pause and rewind buttons in hand, as a way of exploring the themes. The two sets of questions - (1) identity, belonging and community and (2) Studying a film - should be discussed before students watch Witness for the first time. The background information about the lives of the Amish people, who are so central to this film, should also be expiored before watching the film. Students could also investigate some of the listed websites which offer not only information but images of the Amish peopie and their artefacts. During the first screening, students should simply watch the film without taking notes to gain an overall sense of the film's narrative and tone. On a second viewing, the "Ways to watch the film' tasks should be divided between students so that each individual or pair have a different aspect of the film on which to focus their attention. Students could present their findings to the class in a number of ways, including writing up their observations and scene evidence on large sheets of paper, which everyone can then read and perhaps add to. They could give a brief talk about their findings or move into larger groups to share their observations.   
  
BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM Activity 1: Identity, belonging and community   
Identity and Belonging Who we are is much more than our name. Discuss the following questions in small groups. \* To what extent is our sense of self determined by our family experiences? \* Do we always present a consistent 'face' to friends, family and people outside our inner circles? \* How might belonging to a religious group shape our sense of self and community? \* Can online communities offer a sense of belonging to people today? If so, in what ways? \* How do online communities sometimes offer people an opportunity to construct a different identity? \* How do you express a sense of identity with a particular culture or even a group such as a sporting team? \* Bullying is often said to erode identity and confidence. How is exclusion from groups as potent a force in our development as belonging? \* Is identity a fixed concept or subject to change as we develop and experience different worlds? \* Why do you think some of us have a secure sense of our place in the world while for others it is an ongoing struggle? \* What are the positive aspects of 'belonging'?   
  
Community Some students may be familiar with life in communities that choose to separate themselves from mainstream society for reasons that may be part of their religious beliefs. For many of us, though, the relatively self-contained and separate lives lived by groups such as the Amish can seem extraordinary and extreme, as well as fascinating. Yet, in any society, there are a range of different communities to which we all belong. While they may not be as self-contained and bound by tradition as the Amish. they do have their own way of doing things. \* What do you understand by the widely used term 'community'? \* List communities you belong to and describe how they work. - Do people have responsibilities to other members of the community? Are these clearly delineated and what expectations are attached to them? - Is there a leader (or leaders) and what is his or her role? - Does the community have rules? - Can you be yourself in the community? - What restrictions does the group impose and what opportunities does it offer you? - How is the community part of the broader community?   
  
Activity 2: Studying a film   
\* Do you feel more comfortable watching films than reading novels? \* What are the qualities in films that make them such a popular form of entertainment? \* What do you think are the essential differences between film and written texts?   
  
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\* List sny films you have seen that were truly memorable or even life changing. \* Enjoyment, entertainment, enlightenment, escapism, education and shifting perceptions and preconceptions are all things films are claimed to do. Which of these do you see as being most important? \* Film 'texts' set on English courses are often very popular choices of students and teachers, e.g. Gattaca (Andrew Niccol, 1997), a film set in the future exploring some of the possible consequences of [genetic engineering](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/228897/genetic-engineering), was the most popular text on the VCE English syllabus for several years. Equally, Lantana (Ray Lawrence, 2001) and Look Both Ways (Sarah Watt, 2005) are popular choices. Why do you think this might be the case? \* What are the differences …